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Bigger Bucks For Security But How Much And for What?

WHILE Congress and the Pentagon continued to argue last week over numbers — specifically, President Reagan's $1.6 trillion, five-year defense buildup — 150 members of Congress sponsored a resolution calling upon the superpowers to "pursue a complete halt to the nuclear weapons race." The Week in Review asked Representative Les Aspin, Democrat of Colorado, Barry Blechman of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Fred C. Iklé, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, to go behind the numbers and talk strategy. Excerpts of their discussion, with Leslie H. Gelb, national security correspondent for The New York Times, Richard Halloran, a correspondent in The Times's Washington bureau, and Caroline Rand Herron, an editor of The Review, follow.

Question. Has the United States ever really had an overall defense policy, or have we been simply reacting to events all these years?

Mr. Blechman. To the extent to which we led events, we did indeed have a farsighted policy well into the 1950's, where we reacted decisively and effectively to contain the threats that the Soviet Union posed to Europe and in the Near East. That policy came a cropper when we tried to apply it to events in Asia, and later, in Africa.

Mr. Iklé. I believe we have a policy now. And we have had it in prior decades. (But) we have to recognize the changes in the world. Containment has failed in the sense that the Soviets leapfrogged beyond the bounds of containment and established military outposts in Africa, the Caribbean, Asia, often in places where we used to have reinforcing geostrategic positions.

Mr. Aspin. The problem is lack of consensus. On conventional forces, we've gone through cyclical phases from containment to détente. One strategy says, keep the Soviet Union bottled up because you will cause such enormous disruptions that it will force change from within. The other says, get as many relationships going as possible and change will come about because you've gradually brought them into the 20th century and into the Western orbit. And we go back and forth, just as on the nuclear side, between an assured destruction, countervailing strategy and a counterforce strategy.

Mr. Blechman. The crucial factor really is the degree to which Soviet actions are seen as the primary engine behind the various challenges to our interests throughout the world. The Carter Administration, more than any of its predecessors, had seen the diversity of sources of conflict. The present Administration has shifted very sharply.

Mr. Iklé. I would put it differently. The present Administration has decided to act upon the recognition of the Soviet threat, which was in many ways already agreed to, and has had the courage of (its) conviction.

Q. We've heard for 30 years about the bomber gap, the missile gap, the conventional force gap and the spending gap. In almost every instance, they turned out to be illusory, or way overdrawn. Are we going to find that out again in two or four years?

Mr. Iklé. I would disagree with the focus.

I think the changes in the threat can be described in quite a simple fashion by emphasizing two trends, rather than gaps. One is the trend in the investment in military assets. The Soviet Union has been acquiring much more over the last perhaps 20 years. The second trend is the leapfrogging over the lines of containment. Particularly in the event of a major conflict, the Soviet Union would find itself in a much better strategic position.

Military Superiority

Q. Are you saying they now have, in a good many instances, military superiority over us?

Mr. Iklé. We still have an advantage in naval forces, and it is the purpose of the proposed naval program to hold on to an advantage in maritime forces.

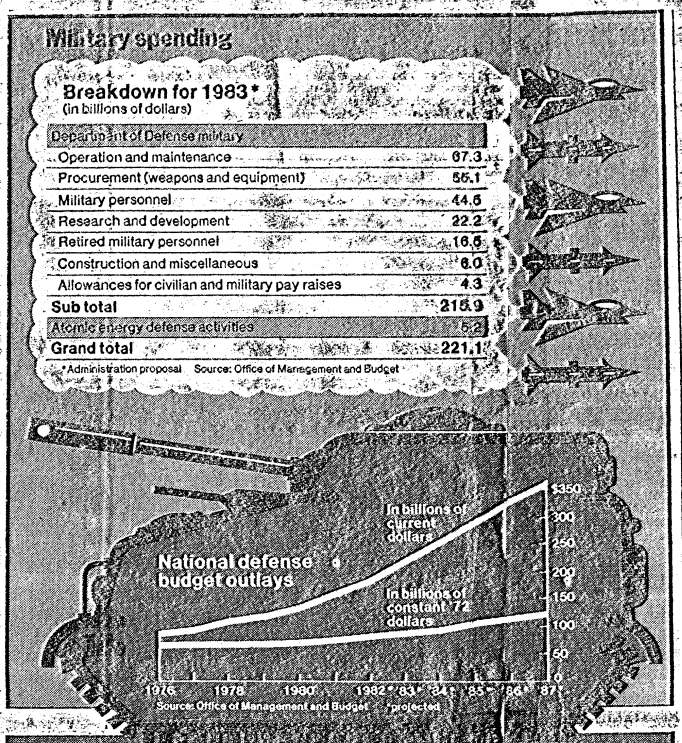
Q. Other than that are we in a position of inferiority?

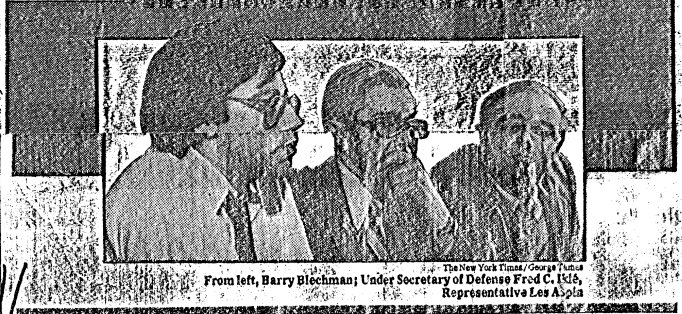
Mr. Iklé. Looking at numbers, we are, in strategic forces and in theater nuclear forces. Qualitatively we have some advantages in conventional equipment, but there is an overriding quantitative advantage on the Soviet Union. But I think we should try to avoid simplistic answers of superiority.

Q. Is the principal threat to the national security of the United States from the Soviet Union?

Mr. Aspin. It depends on how you define national security. We are now dependent upon foreign sources for a large percentage of our oil. We're also threatened by economic competition from Japan and West Germany. We also have environmental threats to national security — the waters are being over-fished. Clearly in terms of the military part of national security, the greatest threat is the Soviet Union. But the other threats — a big military budget doesn't do much good in dealing with those.

Mr. Iklé. Are you saying we therefore don't need a military budget?





The New York Times/George Tames
From left, Barry Blechman; Under Secretary of Defense Fred C. Iklé, Representative Les Aspin

Mr. Aspin. No, no, not at all. It's a question of degree. If I were to criticize this Administration, it would be for the reliance on a very large military budget — not a large military force, just a large military budget — as kind of a hedge against which it conducts foreign policy.

Mr. Iklé. The proposed defense program is not meant to be the cure-all for our foreign policy.

Mr. Aspin. It would be good if the Administration would say that a little more often.

Mr. Iklé. In fact, the President has said this very eloquently, in relation to one particular troubled area. In his speech on the Caribbean and Central America he put a great deal of emphasis on instruments other than military instruments to cope with the problems that we confront.

Mr. Aspin. But the point about who is ahead and who isn't ahead cannot be entirely ignored. Because, ultimately in devising a defense budget you have to come to the question of how much is enough — whether we're going to buy and how much.

Cutting Retirement Pay

Mr. Blechman. The question always is whether you come to that by building up some specific problems, or whether you make an aggregate comparison like the budgetary comparison and then somehow invoke some mysterious political consequences of the fact that we estimate that they spend more than we spend.

Mr. Iklé. Nobody is advocating in the Administration that there are mysterious consequences. It's not mysterious at all, unfortunately. We certainly recognize fully that much more refined comparisons and analyses are needed. But if you begin to cut back from the total defense budget you would begin to widen again the disparity between the investment effort.

Mr. Aspin. It depends on where you cut. Let's say you could with the wave of the hand cut $15 billion out of the retirement program. That doesn't change the military balance at all. Presumably the Soviet Union also spends some money that doesn't contribute to defense. So, you know, raw numbers don't mean much, and neither do statements about how you can't cut.

Q. In making military strategy you have to establish some priorities. What areas are we worried about most? Is Europe still the focus?

Mr. Iklé. There is a shift, yes, which introduces a greater sense of realism. We want to get away from the Maginot Line mentality for the defense of Europe, which piles most of our military assets at one front.

Q. The Alliance concurs?

Mr. Iklé. There is considerable concurrence, although there's occasional hesitation. But the Alliance as a whole has shown a great understanding and sympathy for our effort to strengthen the southern flank, to develop a capability for deterring aggression in the Persian Gulf area.

Q. What about our efforts to spur them on to assume a greater responsibility for their defense?

Mr. Iklé. They are also suffering in Europe from the economic crisis. There's a broader problem of spurring on our allies. One area where we have not yet succeeded in convincing them that it is in our interest to improve Atlantic security is the Caribbean. But I think we're making headway there, too. Because, clearly, NATO is threatened by the military events in the Caribbean.

Mr. Aspin. You know, there is real possibility of a revolt against defense increases in this country unless our allies are doing more. We are putting so much of our capital and our scientific and technical resources into defense, whereas they're putting theirs into Sonys and Toyotas and beating the bejesus out of us in the domestic market.

Q. What's the core of the Administration strategy?

Mr. Iklé. First and foremost, we want to strengthen nuclear deterrence by having forces the aggressor knows are guaranteed to survive his attack. This may mean investments in things such as command, control and communications, which aren't all that visible and glamorous for statistical tables of red and blue comparisons.

But this does not mean, contrary to what has been said, an increase in the emphasis on nuclear war, and particularly not limited nuclear war. (There is) increasing emphasis on being prepared for a multiplicity of different types of possible conflicts involving conventional forces — not only on increased sustainability, but on our ability to have an industrial mobilization. We are presently not prepared for that sufficiently.

Mr. Blechman. The highest priority always has to be accorded to the threat of nuclear war. That's the only threat that can do enormous physical damage to the United States itself.

But you have to go beyond eliminating problems of survivability. What you need is diplomatic policies, and arms control negotiations, to put back the threat of nuclear war into the corner where it's lurked for many years and from which it's only recently come out. I'm glad the Administration puts so much emphasis now on countering impressions that it plans for nuclear wars. That certainly wasn't the case when it first came into office.

Retaliatory Strikes

Mr. Aspin. I don't have any idea what this Administration's defense policy is. And I read the posture statement and I still don't know. And I listen to Fred Iklé and I still don't know. To paraphrase Will Rogers, I think this Administration has never seen a weapons system that it didn't like. That posture statement conveys that it doesn't have an overall policy. We're just buying things without any relation to the threat.

The other thing that worries me very much is the idea of parallel escalation — if they hit us at a place which is disadvantageous to us, we'll go and hit them at a place where it's advantageous to us and disadvantageous to them. This is a bizarre concept.

Mr. Blechman. One of the real problems is when you start thinking of how you might respond to serious provocation, you very quickly come to the conclusion the only thing you could do is to bring the war to the Soviet Union itself. I cannot imagine the Soviet Union absorbing strikes against its own territory without retaliating against American territory.

Q. For the better part of the last 30 years, the basic judgment has been that you have to be able to respond where you are challenged, because, it was generally believed, if you threatened to hit back against the Soviet Union for something that was going on in Vietnam or Iran, it wouldn't be credible to Moscow. Is there any basis for having changed this judgment?

Mr. Iklé. I don't agree with this thesis. We did not ward off the threat to Berlin by being capable to defend Berlin. We did not obtain the Austrian State Treaty by having dominant military strength in Western Austria. What is usually needed is a combination of local and global strength.

Mr. Blechman. You know, the $1.6 trillion, five-year program is completely unrealistic compared to the country's fiscal situation. It's obvious the Administration is putting it out for the Congress to do its work for it. And the trouble with that is that when decisions are made by the budget process, they're not as rational, candidly, as they are when made by an executive in a hierarchy.

Q. Is Congress so inherently irresponsible?

Mr. Blechman. No, of course I'm not saying that. To save money in the short term, to cut outlays, to affect the deficit for fiscal '83 significantly, you have to cut operating and maintenance accounts — or the payroll.

Q. Mr. Iklé, if Congress is going to sacrifice readiness to expansion, aren't you really ending up with the worst of both possible worlds?

Mr. Iklé. No, the Administration's defense program places high priority on readiness. Force expansion is rather modest in most areas.

Mr. Aspin. I think our whole system of dealing with defense is in very serious trouble. How do you increase American forces in a way that makes any sense? For some reason the Army is unable to procure anything that's worth anything. We cannot get a consensus on the basing modes for the MX. Congress cuts the wrong thing.

Q. On procurement alone, as one of his parting shots, Admiral Rickover proposed nationalizing the defense industry. Would it make any difference?

Mr. Iklé. Yes, it probably would be disastrous. It is curious that those who criticize Government waste and inefficiency most vigorously should want the Government to run major industries. The Reagan Administration has initiated several major reforms; if Congress permits these reforms to take hold, we can expect major savings.

Mr. Blechman. The main thing that could be done is to give individuals responsibility and accountability — rewarding them, or not rewarding them, in terms of their careers, according to their performance in bringing in a weapons program that's meeting certain standards.

Q. Absolutely revolutionary.

Mr. Blechman. It's my Calvinist upbringing.

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